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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - April 25, 2008

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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Civil Society

12. Gomel Opposition Activists Jailed and Fined

A Gomel district judge found several activists guilty of participating in an unauthorized March 23 demonstration celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic. The court sentenced United Civic Party member Oleg Khoroshko and Belarusian Christian Democracy activist Svyatoslav Shapovalov April 22 to seven and ten days in jail respectively. Belarusian Association of Journalists member Tatyana Bublikova and Belarusian Social Democratic Party-Gramada activist Dmitriy Kutasov were each fined BYR 525,000 (USD 245) and Belarusian Popular Front member Ivan Adamenko BYR 700,000 (USD 330). Civil society activist Vladimir Nepomnyaschiy was tried at a hearing April 23 and sentenced to 15 days in jail.

13. Ag Minister, Chief Ideology Officer Appointed

Aleksandr Lukashenko appointed Semyon Shapiro April 18 to the post

of Agriculture Minister and promoted Vsevolod Yanchevskiy to the position of "Chief Ideologist." Shapiro pursued market reforms as CEO of the Dzerzhinsk Agricultural Factory from 2004 to 2008. He is also well-known to Agriculture Ministry personnel from his tenure as head of the Ministry's Department of Economic Issues from 1999 to 2004. In the mid 1990s Shapiro was a member of the United Civic Party. Lukashenko promoted Vsevolod Yanchevskiy to the position of Chief Ideology Officer of the Presidential Administration. Yanchevskiy was one of the founders of the GOB-run Youth Union BRSM and served as its chairman from 2000-2001. He was elected to parliament in 2001 and also worked as editor-in-chief of the government magazine "Planeta." Yanchevskiy reportedly voiced support for the so-called "authoritarian modernization" that took place in Singapore and South Korea over the last several decades. According to his former colleagues, he is well-versed in public opinion polling and other contemporary political methodologies. Yanchevskiy will be in charge of advancing state ideology and propaganda and will supervise the activities of Minsk city and oblast ideology officers and state media.

14. Civil Society Leader Jailed for Ceremony

A Stariye Dorogi district court judge sentenced civil society leader Vyacheslav Sivchik April 23 to 15 days in jail. Charges stemmed from Sivchik's participation in an April 19 commemorative ceremony in Stariye Dorogi to unveil a cross in honor of local citizens massacred by pro-Soviet partisans in 1943. Sivchik asserted that it is a Christian tradition and not a crime to mark the sites of massacres with crosses. The local authorities removed the cross from the site April 23.

15. Minsk Residents to Register Satellite Dishes

Independent media reported April 21 that a number of Minsk residents received orders to register their satellite dishes with the local

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government by May 1. Authorities announced they will dismantle unregistered dishes and fine their owners for illegal installation. Earlier this year, local authorities granted the Grodno Architecture Department authority to regulate the installation and registration of satellite dishes there. Human rights advocates maintain the moves are additional attempts by the GOB to control access to satellite broadcasts and curb media freedom.

16. Independent Scientists Establish Anti-Nuclear Group

On April 21, prominent Belarusian scientists Egor Fedyushin, Yuriy Voronezhnev, Georgiy Lepin, and Ivan Nikitchenko established a group to campaign against the construction of a nuclear power plant in Belarus. Fedyushin noted that since the announcement of plans for the plant's construction, the GOB provided no clear "information or economic justification" for the atomic energy program. The scientists emphasized that Belarus suffered the most from the Chernobyl blast and appealed to the international community to secure a "safe living environment" for Belarusians.

17. Opposition Leader Fined for Religion Law Campaign

A Minsk district court fined opposition Belarusian Christian Democracy Co-chair Pavel Severinets BYR 1.4 million (USD 650) April 22 for a signature-collection campaign calling for amendments to the Law on Religion. Severinets allegedly violated procedures that require campaign groups to be registered with the Central Election Commission. Protestant lawyer Sergey Lukanin underscored that Severinets' fine violated the Constitution's guarantee of the right to collect signatures and submit "collective appeals" to GOB institutions.

18. Electoral Official Dismisses Opposition Proposals

Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairperson Lidiya Yermoshina dismissed democratic forces' proposals April 21 to improve implementation of electoral regulations, finding them to be inconsistent with the Electoral Code and duplicative of CEC instructions. Opposition members submitted the proposals March 31,

and on April 7 CEC Secretary Nikolay Lozovik called them "generally constructive." Yermoshina countered that 90 percent of the text was already "similar" to regulations for 2004 parliamentary elections.

Domestic Economy

¶9. New Government Inflation Statistics Released

According to an April 22 Statistics Ministry report, the Belarusian consumer price index rose 13.2 percent in March on the year, an increase of 4.1 percent since December 2007. The average wage in March was USD 378, while the average pension was USD 163.

¶10. Refineries at Full Capacity

Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko announced at a Government session April 22 that the country's two oil refineries are operating at full capacity. Through February, Belarus' exports of petroleum products rose 56.5 percent on the year to USD 2.9 billion, with almost 90 percent of these exports (USD 2.6 billion) going to countries outside the CIS, an increase of 48.9 percent. The refineries became "profitable" once again thanks to subsidies increased by a presidential edict issued last August.

International Trade

¶11. No Progress Reducing Foreign Trade Deficit

Prime Minister Sergey Sidorskiy criticized cabinet members at an April 22 special session of government for insufficient efforts to reduce the country's expanding foreign trade deficit. The plan for the first quarter of 2008 was to achieve a USD 40 million surplus, though the actual result was a USD 20.6 million deficit. Belarus' trade deficit in 2007 was USD 2.7 billion.

¶12. Quote of the Week

MP Galina Mazurkevich and Deputy Premier Aleksandr Kosinets, straying off topic at a roundtable discussion on how to deal with the consequences of the Chernobyl tragedy:

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Mazurkevich: "I often watch television here, and I find that 70 or 80 percent of it is sex and violence. The sex isn't so bad, considering our demographic situation, but the violence is unacceptable. I have a request -- let's take measures against it."

Kosinets: "My dear Galina Alekseyevna... every home now has satellite television. What can we do? Take the satellites out of orbit?... We should prohibit phone sex services, and do all we can to stamp them out."

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